

Living with Horses

"If wishes were horses beggars would ride—"
Shakespeare

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

Ironically perhaps the most powerful influence on my days growing up in Duxbury, namely, living with horses has been passed over as I dealt with other aspects of my formative years (what we ate, how we kept warm, how we treated our ailments). It was to a runaway horse that I owe my first job after graduating from college, teaching English in an Episcopal Church School in Honolulu, a story that I will flush out at the end of this essay.

Let me begin with a frank statement that although caring for horses was probably the largest item in my lifestyle, I never thought about describing it until a few days ago when I recalled my father's retail meat business which involved being responsible for a stable of 4 or 5 horses who pulled our meat wagons around town. I have recounted specific incidents with particular horses, such as the time we tried to outrun the 5:30 commuter train with Ginger or the time Prince refused to stand out in the cold at a gunning stand on Duxbury Beach. (One cold October night while my sister Ruth and I drank cocoa and ate donuts inside a warm room, but just took French leave and made us walk up and down the sand dunes plotting our course between telephone poles in the dark.) But I have never described the life style that care for these horses required. I hope my experiences and the reflections they evoke will interest *Clipper* readers.

Geological traces of horses have been found in parts of North America but then they disappeared here. In fact the domestication of the horse was rather late following that of oxen, burros, camels, elephants, goats and dogs and cats. They emerged as political powers under the sponsorship of Ghenghis Khan in the 12th century when Mongolian "Ponies" formed the bulk of his fighting forces when he subjected most of the Eurasian land mass. I was reminded of the power of these animals when Harriet and I were visiting Inner Mongolia and we saw a demonstration of animal power. Dromedaries, camels, and other animals were displayed and one of the younger men led the Mongolian horse a hundred yards away, then came charging past us riding bareback; I could imagine 1,000 a sword swinging knights of the grasslands bearing down on an army of footsoldiers and how invincible they were. The Cossacks of the Caspian Sea area are their descendants.

My father loved horses and at the peak of this life

watering and cleaning out the stalls before breakfast while Father pulled the meat wagons out of the shed and rolled them down to the staging area just off our basement meat market to load with provisions for the day's run. Ben Lawson recalls observing this latter practice from his house across the street. The barn had space for stalls, harnesses; a drinking trough, and a carriage on the ground floor. Upstairs was storage of oats and corn poured down chutes into the horses' mangers,

together with a metal cage in the manger corner to be filled at feeding time with usually salt hay cut from Duxbury's marshes. A crisis arose during the winter of 1918 when the pipes bringing water to the barn froze and we had to trot the horses down to the flagpole across from the Cable Office where the then Rural Society had given permission to turn on the water in the trough they had given in 1897 (now part of the parklet on the bank above Blue Fish River) and give our horses drink. I can still recall seeing these horses without harness trot down to get their morning drink and then back to the barn.

This was the winter that I remember lifted the pilings of Gurnet Bridge so the entire structure looked like a gigantic cork screw. I don't recall but Elden Wadsworth does, that with the bay frozen solid beyond the Bug Powder Point School boys built ice sailboats and sailed all over the Bay. My sister Betty remembers driving a horse and sleigh over to Clark's Island during that same winter.

How different was living with horses from our life style of today? Today we go to our garage, open the car door, slip the key into the ignition and we are off—maybe for several days. The car requires little daily attention whereas a stable full of horses means a commitment day in and day out (as today's horse owners are finding out) and there is no getting away from this. We are a free and mobile society, with none of the daily obligations that hungry and thirsty animals require. Horses use was hard work, what with the care and feeding and harnessing involved. My father loved horses—especially spirited ones that he could tame and bend to his will. He sneered at the automobile which he felt to be a passing fad. He felt that until a vehicle could live off the land, reproduce itself as animals could they would soon pass out of use. Of course he could not have anticipated the environmental destruction cars would visit on us.

It is sometimes assumed that horses were present in great numbers as autos now are, but according to Irene Walker, whom I interviewed in connection with Duxbury's 250th Anniversary, horses were to be seen in

Hall's Corner which, in its prime had 40 horses and carriages and harnesses. These met the trains, too, and ferried people to the Myles Standish Hotel, which boasted of meeting 12 trains a day in the summer.

The late Charles Crocker, whose park named for him on the shore of Island Creek Pond I had the honor of dedicating, took his first Duxbury job here with Cushing Livery Stable. He rode the train to Kingston from Bridgewater and then hiked with his carpet bag containing all his worldly possessions to Duxbury where he soon married the boss's daughter as many another smart man has done and began the distinguished career we remember in town. Duxbury had these 2 transportation sources, so must folks did not need to keep a horse.

But the Merry establishment continued with its horses long after Briggs and Cushing livery stables had switched to automobiles. There was plenty for horses to do, what with plowing victory gardens, driving down the beach to provision the gunning stands and on occasion hauling a mired car out of a marsh. We peddled meats in Duxbury Village Mondays, Wednesdays, Friday, and on Powder Point, Standish Shore, and North and West Duxbury we visited on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. My father and I had a sort of conspiracy on Sundays in the Fall. I found Sunday School so boring I gladly braved the stinging sands and biting winds of the beach instead. I can remember vividly walking behind the wagon flailing my arms to stimulate circulation and thinking to myself, "This is rough but it sure beats Sunday School."

The highpoint of horsemanship in this area was Marshfield Fair, where the horse ruled supreme. There were sulky races and pulling contests, both of which fascinated my father. I admired him for his gentle treatment of the horses as they engaged in the pulling contests. A large load of concrete blocks was set up and the various teams of horses tried their best to skate it along the ground. Most teamsters whipped and shouted at their horses but Father just prodded them gently and spoke softly. Invariably he came off with a first or second prize.

But the handwriting was on the wall. I remember vividly the Fair of 1921 and the auto show that year. I remember the Buick exhibit with its cutaway engine and first time 4-wheel brakes. Their slogan that year was "Power to start and Power to Stop." My own attention had switched to autos and I gladly indulged in the rites of spring with our first car, a Model-T Ford. The rites of spring consisted of removing the heavy metal head of the engine and sandpapering off the accumulated carbon.

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My father loved horses and at the peak of this life with them he had 4 in the barn in Duxbury Village pulling the meat wagons and one pair doing the work on North Hill, and another heavier pair for heavy hauling rented out to the town for highway building. The daily regimen included rising at 6, going to the horse barn that was especially arranged for this purpose and feeding.

It is sometimes assumed that horses were present in great numbers as autos now are, but according to Irene Walker, whom I interviewed in connection with Duxbury's 350th Anniversary, horses were too expensive to keep and too much work. For most people at this time the use of livery stables was common. There were 2 of these in town. One was Briggs just across Blue Fish River Bridge. This later moved to present Railroad Ave. to meet the dozen or so trains a day that came through in the summer. The other was operated by the Cushings at

had switched to autos and I gladly indulged in the rites of spring with our first car, a Model-T Ford. The rites of spring consisted of removing the heavy metal head of the engine and sandpapering off the accumulated carbon. Then we would "grind" the valves i.e., rotate them with a sandy compound that made them seat snugly and not allow any escaping power. It was not long before scaled down Model-T Fords racing on the same clay tracks the horses had used became the hit of the Fair.

Our heavy horses left every morning from North Hill to move earth preparing future highways for autos. In the days before bulldozers these strong animals would be hitched up to a metal scoop as long and wide as a bath tub which would dig into the earth, grab a load of soil and when it reached the required spot flip over and deposit its load. As they left each morning I remember thinking, "If only those horses knew they were making themselves obsolete."

It is probably time to tell how a "runaway horse" got me my first job. It happened this way: after I had been teaching for over a year in this school and felt a warm acceptance I confronted the headmaster one Sunday afternoon after chapel services. "I have a question to ask you, I said. "How in the world did you ever have the nerve to hire me sight unseen to come here so far from home?"

"Well," he said, "it was like this. You may remember I attended Powder Point School in Duxbury and graduated there. You must also recall the custom of turning all the

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Colbert Honored by MADD

Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) announces that law enforcement officers in Plymouth County will receive the "Officer of the Year" award on May 27 at the Country Club of Halifax.

Sgt. John Colbert of Duxbury is among the group to be honored as a 1993 Officer of the Year.

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Girl Scout Happenings



Memorial Day Activities

The Girl Scouts will once again assist the American Legion in decorating the Veteran's graves at the Mayflower Cemetery on Saturday, May 29, at 10 am, with a raindate of Sunday, May 30. Bring your wagons or plastic sleds.

Girls from all levels of scouting are welcome to come. Leave your name and troop level with Service Unit President Carol Martnett, at the entrance of the cemetery in order to be eligible to be part of the honor guard in the parade on Monday.

Memorial Day Parade

On Memorial Day we will walk as a unit in the annual parade. Plan to arrive at the Myles Standish Cemetery on Chestnut St. at 9:15. We will proceed to The First Parish Church, where the girls should be met by their parents. Call your leader with any questions.

Beach Cookout and Sing-a-long

Set aside June 5, raindate June 6, and plan for an evening of fun as we cook hot dogs over a camp fire and join the sing-a-long. Parents should plan to walk their daughters onto the beach. The cookout will start at 5:30 and end with a friendship circle promptly at 8. When coming to the beach, proceed through the parking lot to the left as you cross the bridge. Cookout is to the left as you cross the bridge. Arrangements have been made to allow parents without beach stickers to enter the parking lot to drop off or pickup.

Troop Happenings

Junior troop 437 recognized Mother's Day with a mother/daughter lunch at the Winsor House. The girls had a fashion show modeling clothes from the Limited II and Gap for Kids.

Wildlands Trust Free Guided Walk

Join the Plymouth County Wildlands Trust (PCWT) for a free, guided walk at the West Shore Preserve in Plymouth from 1 to 3 on Sunday, June 6. This 232.5-acre tract is PCWT's largest, and one of the most interesting preserves. It is bounded on the North and West by Myles Standish State Forest, on the East by Mast Rd. and Halfway Pond.

The leader will be LeBaron Briggs IV, a marine biologist, who spent boyhood summers in the woods of West Shore Preserve. He will guide us along a loop trail, which enables walkers to see the diversity of the preserve's habitats, including pine barrens.

During late Spring and early Summer, prairie warblers, rufous-sided towhees, and common yellowthroats are prevalent in the Western part of the preserve. One highlight at the preserve was the discovery of nesting eastern bluebirds several years ago.



Happy Birthday

Tyler Hunt, Patrick Mylett,
Stephen Hearson, Carrie Mackiewicz,
Brad Albright, Sara Osgood, Annie Gallin,
Dean Shaver, Keith...

LIVING WITH HORSES

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boys loose after Sunday night supper to walk up to Paul Peterson's Drug Store for ice cream sodas." I admitted I was aware of this. "Well, one Sunday night while it was still daylight boys noted a runaway horse that had just dumped its load of people out and was galloping up the hill towards us. We were all scared and drew back against the door of the drug store. A man on the edge of the crowd leaped off the curb grabbing the horse's bridle and was dragged several yards but brought the horse to a standstill. He then calmed the horse down and turned him over to the bedraggled folks who had been tossed out. That man was your father and when your application landed on my desk and I knew that it was the son of that man who had graduated from Harvard, I felt it was worth the risk."

The age of horses has come and gone and as I bring this essay to a close, perhaps a reflection or 2 may be in order. First, the basic social discipline of feeding and watering and training a stable of horses with the sense of belonging close to the soil has gone with it. One way of describing our age is that it is a restless age. Nothing is nailed down; everything is in flux. The loss of this symbol of caring is a real one. And it is not only a restless age, it is also a rootless age. The automobile has added much to the expanse of our lives, but it has uprooted us. Kinship with the animal world and the continuing expression of this kinship is gone.

I remember well when horses began to disappear that people said that the emotional place they held in our lives would be replaced by something sinister. It is impossible to love an automobile the way you can love a horse and see that affection returned. It is easy to bemoan the disintegration of our culture and the increasing volume of personal violence. The loss of the love of horses is a real one, and human emotions deprived of the natural love of our animal cousins our human nature with its bestial urges unleashed finds itself committing acts of personal violence such has not been known for centuries. Reverence and respect for other people is learned by dependence—real dependence—accepted as given or perhaps a better word is "lent" to us. The Boston Police force has to undergo training to soften "domestic" violence i.e. the bludgeoning of inter family members, for example.

I don't know how many *Clipper* readers will go along with the notion that the elimination of horses as part of our lifestyle is a direct cause of the releasing of the beast in man, but I feel certain there is a connection. Living with horses has been a mitigating factor in all our human relationships and the self-destructive tensions we are wrestling with every day must somehow find a counter balance or the end of our culture is assured.

TO ALL TRAVELLERS TO VENICE

May we suggest "VENICE" our new issue of
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English script by Marie Zoe Greene Mercer.